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IDSA COMMENT

Does Nuclear Asia have its Own Dangers?

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The third Nuclear Security Summit (NSS) took place on March 23-24, 2014 in The Hague with 53 countries along with the United Nations, the Interpol, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the European Union participated. Of the 53 countries 15 were from Asia. In the run-up to the summit, a number of writings appeared. A couple of these writings tried to focus on Asian nuclear dangers.

True, the global nuclear order, at the commencement of the Cold War and the East West conflict, was predominantly centred in Europe. The 21st century is witnessing a shift. Asia is witnessing major developments relating to nuclear issues—military and civilian both. Currently, Asia has four declared nuclear weapon countries, namely China, India, Pakistan and North Korea; one acknowledged nuclear weapon country, Israel and a suspected nuclear weapon country, Iran.

China is a member of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). North Korea was a member of the NPT, but after its withdrawal from the treaty, it has conducted three nuclear tests. The last test was on February 12, 2013. India and Pakistan never joined the NPT. Israel, too, did not join the NPT, and it is widely acknowledged to possess nuclear weapons. However, it does not confirm possession of nuclear weapons. The US provides nuclear protective umbrella to Japan, South Korea and Australia in the Pacific Asia.

Whether new nuclear weapons developments will induce a nuclear chain reaction in the region and beyond has been a matter of serious debate and discussions over the years. In recent months, Iran has thrown surprises by engaging the Western world to mitigate, if not end the ongoing crisis. However, Asia still has its share of worries. There are no properly functioning Asian security institutions or regimes to regulate Asia's nuclear politics. It has to rely on global institutions and regimes for regulation of its nuclear politics and

management of nuclear order. Treaties like the NPT are struggling to provide stability in the world as in Asia.

In the last four decades, interestingly, all the new nuclear weapons countries in the world have come from Asia. China actually made the beginning of the nuclearisation of Asia. Over the years, it has become the principal source of threat and proliferation in Asia. Yet, the nuclear weapons countries outside Asia are possessing more than 90 percent of global nuclear weapons stockpile. Just focusing on Asia may not give the correct picture of the global nuclear weapons scenario.

Shifting to civil nuclear energy, two of the Asian countries—Japan and South Korea—had substantial share of nuclear energy in their national energy profiles. Japan is still struggling over its national nuclear energy policy after the Fukushima incidents. In other countries, nuclear energy has not contributed much in electricity generation. However, a number of countries in Asia have plans for the development of nuclear energy. In fact, the new phase of nuclear renaissance, to a great extent, is being fuelled by Asian nuclear energy ambition.

So, Asia is leading the way in the civil nuclear energy as well. The IAEA informs that out of the 72 reactors under construction worldwide, 47 reactors are in Asia, including West Asia and Taiwan. China alone is constructing 28 reactors. India is constructing 6 reactors, as the IAEA statistics shows. In reality, India has already announced construction of about 25 reactors either in collaboration with foreign countries or indigenously. Pakistan has also entered into collaboration with China to build a number of reactors. Many countries from South East and West Asia are also planning to construct nuclear reactors for nuclear energy.

All the six countries (China, India, South Korea, Pakistan, Japan and the United Arab Emirates) which are constructing nuclear reactors in Asia, are participating in the NSS. Taiwan because of its unique status is the only exception. However, even Taiwan is deeply engaged to the international community in general and the Western world in particular. In general, the world looks confident about the safety and security practices Taiwan has adopted. All the six countries are the members of the IAEA.

All the six countries are the parties to the Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material. However, only three countries—China, India and the United Arab Emirates have ratified the 2005 Amendment to the Convention. Three notable exceptions are Japan,

South Korea and Pakistan. Interestingly, South Korea was the host of the 2012 NSS. Another relevant treaty for nuclear security is the International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism which was opened for signature in 2005 and entered into force in 2007. Five out of these six countries have signed this Convention except Pakistan. South Korea has signed but not ratified it yet.

The Code of Conduct on the Safety and Security of Radioactive Sources has also been supported by all the six countries, and all have appointed points of contact in their respective countries. It is true that a couple of countries, including Pakistan have not supported the supplementary Guidance on the Import and Export of Radioactive Sources. These countries need to take the required corrective measures.

Here comes the real question: is nuclear Asia or new nuclear Asia emitting some dangerous signals? Any unmanaged science or weapon is dangerous; in that way, new nuclear Asia carries the potential of turning dangerous. The west is hesitant to identify the real culprits such as Pakistan, North Korea and China, which are posing nuclear dangers. Tarnishing the entire Asia with the same brush may not be very helpful in meeting the dangers. Any alarmist methodology to highlight the Asian scenario may backfire.

A closer scrutiny reveals that the Asian nuclear scenario is not qualitatively different from other parts of the world. As discussed, Asia seems to have less nuclear weapons than Europe or America. The solution lies in nuclear disarmament, not contentious nuclear arms control or reduction. The same holds true for nuclear energy. Problems, which are global in nature cannot be solved through regional mechanisms.

The NSS process needs to focus on the cooperative approach of the Washington 2010 summit. The very idea of starting the NSS process was to bridge the gap and the existing non-proliferation divide. This sound beginning should not be scuttled with unnecessary contentious issues. For other problems and contentious issues, the international community may work in other forums and bodies. The bottom line is many of the Asian countries are rising economies and these countries require nuclear energy growth for its economic growth.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.